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ABSTRACT

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had little to say specifically about communication and language, but their works hint at the direction their critique of communication might have taken. Language and consciousness are conditioned by specific means of production and sociopolitical circumstances and are therefore ideological. The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs (words with meaning); whenever a sign is present, ideology is present. Each class within a society accents the particular connotations of its signs that enhance its own interests; these different accents result in the class struggle. The ruling class in capitalism creates and sustains its ideology and restricts social intercourse by organizing the economic forces of society. Also, capitalism and the mass media developed together as it became necessary for merchants to be aware of world events. The mass media exploit workers by attempting to make the capitalistic ideology uniaccentual. As part of the production process spread by the mass media, advertising exploits workers in the economy and in the world market. Communication research, like most social sciences, is grounded in the status quo and reproduces the uniaccentuality of the ruling class ideology. (TJ)

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Qualitative Studies Division

MARXISM AND COMMUNICATION

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Although Marx and Engels never systematically dealt with communication and language, their work, at times, strongly hints at the direction with which they would address the problem. The major reason Marx and Engels did not deal with the problem of language and communication in society is that they felt compelled to give an adequate rendering of the materialistic base which, they believed, was the primary constituting factor of society. It is clear, from a reading of their works, that the establishment of the materialistic base of a society would require an exhaustive empirical analysis of the economic foundations of that society. Most of Marx's life was devoted to just such an analysis. In an 1851 letter, Marx wrote to Engels that he "had got so far" with his economic researches that he "could be finished with the whole economic shit in five weeks" (Mandel, 1971: 79). Marx grossly underestimated the task for, thirty-two years later, at his death, the work remained unfinished.

It is easy to understand why Marx underestimated the magnitude of the task he had set for himself. The interactions of the economic, social, and political spheres are so complex that Marx, in effect, had to recast the history of man.

For Marx, history shows that the way men are coincides with their form of production. Marx writes:

> The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce.

> This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce (Marx and Engels, 1976:43).

Thus, Marx studies man, as the architect of his life, with the point of departure being the socio-economic circumstances in which he finds himself, rather than from a viewpoint centering on ideas. Language must also be viewed as a process of production. Neglecting this fact only accentuates the fragmentary and underdeveloped consideration of language and communication in the works of Marx and Engels. In their words:

> From the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men (Marx and Engels, 1976:50-51).

Essentially, then, language is developed in social intercourse primarily by man in his cooperation with other men in the process of production, life-activity, or work and not in an isolated and individual state.

This does not mean that Marx and Engels had nothing to say about language and communication. In fact, throughout their writings there are direct and indirect references to language and communication, despite their infrequency and lack of elaboration. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to elaborate upon Marx's notions of language and communication, and their implications for mass communication research in general.

According to Marx, man is through and through, a social animal.

Indeed, individuality itself cannot exist for a human being outside a specific social setting. And, thus production is thoroughly social and without any factual grounding when discussed in terms of an isolated individual. Likewise, language and production are inextricably intertwined by their fundamental social connections. Social relations and their accompanying forms of social intercourse are intimately bound up with particular forces and modes of production. In short, production is not a generic term, but is a process of development that must be examined historically. All stages of production or "epochs" share some common features, however, each "epoch" has features which are unique to it (See Marx, 1970). Marx establishes this historical development of changing productive forces and production relations in the following argument against the prevalent German Idealism of his day:

> The phantoms formed in the human brain are also necessarily sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life (Marx and Engels, 1976:47).

And, therefore, consciousness has its existence only in terms of man as a social animal. That is, consciousness, strictly speaking, cannot arise, or reside in, the isolated individual (or in nature). Simply put, any definition of consciousness must be sociological. In large measure, then, consciousness is a product of language. V.N. Volosinov, one of few scholars to attempt a systematic treatment of a Marxist philosophy of language, emphasizes the development of consciousness through the

expression of signs. As Volosinov puts it: "Idealism and psychologism alike overlook the fact that understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material (e.g., inner speech), that sign bears upon sign, that consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs" (Volosinov:11).

In effect, language and consciousness are conditioned by specific modes of production and socio-political circumstances and are, thereby, necessarily ideological. Every ideology, having its own orientation toward reality, reflects and distorts it. From this it follows that everything ideological possesses meaning. According to Volosinov, a sign is anything that stands for, reflects, or refracts something outside its particular nature (i.e., posesses meaning) and is necessarily ideological. In Volosinov's words, "the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present" (Volosinov:10). The meanings of a sign cannot be ascertained, to any appreciable degree, from a dictionary listing, but, in fact, its many potential meanings must be appreciated in terms of its numerous potential and specific ideological renderings. Volosinov characterizes the numerous meanings that a sign may possess by the term multiaccentuality. The ideological import endemic to signs is conditioned to a considerable extent by the economic base underpinning a specific society. Volosinov writes:

> The reality of ideological phenomena is the objective reality of social signs. The laws of this reality are the laws of semiotic communication and are directly determined by the total aggregate of social and economic laws. Ideological reality is the immediate superstructure over the economic basis. Individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only

> a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs (Volosinov:13).

From this it is clear that consciousness is a product of interpersonal communication. So, we may say, individuals as participants in a social situation, relying heavily on their specific life activity, determine the meaning, the ideological import, of a sign.

Words, in and of themselves, are inherently neutral. It is only in carrying out specific ideological functions that words become signs (i.e., take on meaning); thus, signs are created by a specific ideology and cannot be separated from it. Words, then, can serve any ideology. Words are implicated in any act occurring between people, and it is in this collaboration between people, in ideological exchange, that words take on specific meanings. Further, the relations between people are determined by production relations and the socio-political order. In a very direct way, the ideological import of signs is determined by the socio-economic conditions of society.

To argue that all communication is composed of signs is to argue the absurd. In point of fact, some of our verbal communication is fixed and invariant; Volosinov calls these fixed and invariant utterances signals. By signal, Volosinov means, that the meaning of an utterance does not reflect or refract something outside of itself, that is, its meaning is not determined by a specific ideology. Signals refer to definite and fixed objects or activities that do not evoke any evaluative judgments in the situation in which they are encountered. Signals are not determined by the particular mode of production or socio-political order of a society. Studying language outside of the particular

situation (ideology) in which it occurs is to reduce signs to signals and consequently to fail to grasp the ideological nature of language.

At the same time, the meaning of some signs is not solely determined by specific ideologies; rather, there is some "ideological communication" that transverses all ideologies, i.e., there are certain meanings of signs that all or most ideologies share in some form. It is precisely this sharing that permits individuals of different social situations (evolving stages of production) to communicate. Simply, as with the stages of production, all ideologies share certain "ideological communication" and, at the same time, each ideology has its own unique repertoire of signs endemic to it. Volosinov writes:

> Each period and each social group has had and has its own repertoire of speech forms for ideological communication in human behavior. Each set of cognate forms, i.e., each behavioral speech genre, has its own corresponding set of themes. . . . Every stage in the development of a society has its own special and restricted circle of items which alone have access to that society's attention and which are endowed with evaluative accentuation by that attention. Only items within that circle will achieve sign formation and become objects in semiotic communication (Volosinov:20-22).

Not only does each stage of production have its own repertoire of signs, but each class within a society accents the particular connotation which enhances their own interests. Although each class uses one and the same language, it is precisely these different accents that result in the class struggle. Since signs are multiaccentual, the class in control strives to perpetuate its particular ideological meaning as being invariant, i.e., to reduce the multiaccentuality of signs to uniaccentuality coincident with their particular ideology (the status quo). Because the ruling class attempts to make its ideological

communication uniaccentual, the possible tension that would result from different classes imparting different meanings (accents) to the same sign only infrequently rises to the surface.

> This inner dialectic quality of sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes. In the ordinary conditions of life, the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully because the ideological sign in an established, dominant ideology is always somewhat reactionary and tries, as it were, to stabilize the preceding factor in the dialectic flux of the social generative process, so accentuating yesterday's truth as to make it appear today's (Volosinov:23-24).

How then is the ruling class able to create and sustain its ideology as the dominant ideology, and thus restrict social discourse? Capitalism organizes the economic forces of society in such a way that the forms of social intercourse in the work place are controlled, and, in fact, this control permeates the total organization of society. As society becomes more complex and as the productive forces continually develop, it is incumbent upon the ruling class to extend its control throughout the total reaches of society in order to insure that it remains in power. One among the many ways the ruling class is able to control and sustain its control is through the mass media.

Capitalism and the mass media grew up side by side having their genesis in feudalism. Marx argues that it is the division between the town and the country in the feudal epoch that is seminal for the development of capitalism. In the country, exchange is characterized by natural domination, i.e., man was dependent upon nature for his means of subsistence. Men were bound together by kinship (family or tribe) or by forms of authority centering on tradition or religion. On the

other hand, in towns man was dependent on other men to fulfill his basic needs; he was dependent on the accumulated labor of other men. This exchange relationship between men in towns necessitated a division of labor based on the means of production. As a consequence of these exchange relations, towns developed administrative functions which protected the existence of the emerging institutions of order. As urban populations grew, the division of labor became more pronounced, the instruments of production became more concentrated and thus labor became a source of capital. Serfs, moving from country to town, were subjected to these new relations of production and thus became a source of capital to those few who controlled the instruments of production. It became incumbent upon the town, then, to protect capital and private property. Capital in these towns consisted of the exchange of goods such as houses and tools; capital was fixed unlike the movable capital (money) of modern times. And, for the most part, feudal towns were isolated from one another (See Marx and Engels, 1976).

The next step in the development of capitalism, Marx argues, was the separation of production and commerce which resulted in the formation of the merchant class. With the development of the merchant class, communication between towns also developed. In order for merchants to foster commerce, they had to be cognizant of such things as market conditions, shipwrecks, wars, etc. To obtain this necessary information, they were compelled to develop modes of communication. It is at this point that the mass media as we know them today had their origins. Pietila argues that printers produced "loose leaflets" providing the necessary economic information. But during times of economic depression,

printers sold these "loose leaflets" to the public (albeit because of low literacy the reading public was small) by adding "sensational news" to the economic information. The printers soon realized that the sale of these "loose leaflets" yielded a profit. The printers and publishers, then, became natural members of the bourgeoisie (Pietila, 1977).

Marx argues that the final step separating the feudal epoch from modern capitalism was the rise of manufacturing, a further step in the division of labor resulting in specialization by towns and trade rivalries between them. Trade also became politically significant on a national basis; for just as it had been incumbent upon towns to protect commerce, so now it was necessary for nations to protect manufacturing. Marx writes:

> With the advent of manufacture the relationship between worker and employer changed. In the guilds the patriarchal relationship between journeymen and master continued to exist; in manufacture its place was taken by the monetary relation between worker and capitalist--a relationship which in the countryside and in small towns retained a partriarchal tinge, but in the larger, the real manufacturing towns, quite early lost almost all patriarchal complexion (Marx, 1976:74).

Marx continues this argument saying that the development of free competition within nations in the 17th, but particularly in the 18th century, marks the ascendancy and victory of the bourgeoisie over the ancien regime. Concomitant with this, the strain engendered by free competition pushed the bourgeoisie to extend their markets to the whole world. Although the socio-economic development of each nation must be examined in its own historical particularity, generally speaking, it is also true that big industry created classes that share interests irrespective of nationalities.

Returning to the mass media, it is clear that they are an integral part of the capitalist mode of production, and their functions cannot be understood without keeping this in mind. These information products (print as well as the electronic media), like all other capitalistic products, are determined by the capitalistic mode of production. Thus, media owners act to increase the value of their capital. The media owners add value by exploiting their own workers as well as workers engaged in production in the other sectors of the economy. Media attempt to internalize and eternalize the capitalist relations of production, i.e., the media attempt to make the capitalistic ideology uniaccentual. This is true whether the owners or their subordinates consciously manipulate their ideology or do so unconsciously by attempting to do the best job they know how.

The adversary relationship, for example, which the American press maintains exists between themselves and news sources is, for the most part, a myth. "The ideology of the American press stresses the 'adversary' relationship between news sources and newsmen. Most often, these presumed combatants are more accurately described as sparring partners. Hardly ever are they really unrelenting opponents in a knock-down battle. The press takes pride in the occasional public figure it happens to floor. But when it attacks, or even topples, an officeholder for misbehaving in office, it is attacking an individual politician almost never an entire aspect of the prevailing political system" (Roshco:116). The content of the media, rather than denigrating capitalism, reaffirms the principles of capitalistic domination.

The media exploit workers in the other sectors of the economy

through advertising. Advertising has reached a stage in the capitalistic mode of production such that it has become, for the capitalist, an integral part of the production process. But advertising is only a part of the production process in a most distorted way. By this we mean, advertising does not contribute to the value of a product in the process of its production but only aims at the creation of a demand for it where none existed previously. The costs of advertising are skimmed off workers' wages and handed over to the media. Thus, capitalists have come to consider advertising as a normal cost of production. In the words of Baran and Sweezy,

> This truly fantastic outpouring of resources (for advertising) does not reflect some frivolous irrationality in corporate managements or some peculiar predilection of the American people for singing commercials, garish billboards, and magazines and newspapers flooded with advertising copy. What has actually happened is that advertising has turned into an indispensable tool for a large sector of corporate business. . . . Although advertising at first appeared to corporate managements as a deplorable cost to be held down as much as possible, before long it turned into what one advertising agency has rightly called a "must for survival" for many a corporation enterprise (Baran and Sweezy:119).

Having exploited the world market, capitalists, in order to maintain necessary profit margins, need to generate new markets within their own society. Although the emphasis on production continues unabated, the direction of society has shifted from a saving society to a consuming society. And, advertising has played a key role in this shift. Baran and Sweezy argue that the dominant function of advertising is to instill in society a need to consume and the principal means of doing this is through advertisings creation of new needs and wants. "The unquestioned success of advertising in achieving these aims has

greatly strengthened its role as a force counteracting monopoly capitalism's tendency to stagnation and at the same time marked it as the chief architect of the famous "American Way of Life" (Baran and Sweezy:128).

Summarizing the role of the mass media in capitalistic society, it is obvious that any examination of the mass media must be grounded in an examination the socio-economic structures which largely determine the functioning of that society. Cultural expressions, then, are largely products of the mass media which seek to perpetuate the dominant ideology of the ruling class. Advertising, which runs through these cultural expressions, blunts and delays capitalism's inner contradictions through the continuing process of need creation. Advertising clouds and distorts the distinction between primary and secondary needs, attempting to translate all consumer products into necessary needs of society. In many ways, then, the mass media serve a maintenance function in capitalistic society.

The implications of Marx's arguments for mass communication research and for social science in general are critical. The history of the social sciences has been one of compartmentalization and specialization; in effect, man has been divided into narrow areas of study with little or no communication occurring between the separate social sciences. What has been missing is a view of man situated in his total societal context with all of its attendant ramifications and complexities. According to Marx, man has to be viewed in a specific historical context.

With the demise of the ancien regime, authority structures grounded in metaphysics were supplanted by the new social sciences grounded in "facts." Unlike religiously based authority structures, social sciences

sought to establish their disciplines outside the pale of ideology. The social sciences thought that all that needed to be done to persuade reasonable men was to marshal the "facts." Issues that were once open to public discussion now became the intellectual province of social scientists invested with the requisite expertise. By studying the "facts" of the emerging social order, social scientists locked themselves into an examination of what is, and thereby tacitly reaffirmed the existence of the status quo, i.e., the capitalistic order. Although extolling the virtues of objectivity (a value-free study of facts), they end up as thinly-veiled ideological apologists of what is only a specific historical evolution of socio-economic structures.

Furthermore, these social sciences, grounded in the ideology of the status quo, determine what the legitimate topics of study are. For example, behaviorism and functionalism examine human behavior and institutions as sets of normative expectations and roles. What is problematic for the social sciences is how man should behave within the contours of given societal institutions, i.e., the social sciences tend to be reactionary. In reporting on man's behavior and the functions of social institutions, social scientists do not focus on explanation and understanding but rather on prediction and control. Simply, then, the social sciences, intentionally or unintentionally, produce and reproduce the uniaccentuality of the ruling class' ideology. As Lukacs puts it:

> When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisis. For the latter it is a matter of life and death to understand its own system of production

> in terms of eternally valid categories: it must think of capitalism as being predestined to eternal survival by the eternal laws of nature and reason. Conversely, contraditions that cannot be ignored must be shown to be purely surface phenomena, unrelated to this mode of production (Lukacs:10-11).

Mass communication has been as guilty as the other social sciences in its ahistorical study of man in society. Lazarsfeld, readily acknowledged as one of the founding fathers of communication research, admits that communication research attempts to answer questions posed by decision-makers in private or governmental agencies. What is lacking, according to Lazarsfeld, is that not enough attention focuses on the wider role of the mass media in modern society. Lazarsfeld's administrative research asks how the mass media function to integrate individuals and institutions in society. By asking how the media integrate individuals and institutions in a society, Lazarsfeld, in effect, concerns himself with how these individuals and institutions conform to a given socio-economic state of affairs.

Uses and gratifications research, a direct offshoot of functionalism, also ignores the socio-historical development of capitalism, takes the particular media formations as given, centers its research on the uses to which audience members put the media to, and thereby bypasses the ways in which the media exploit audiences. In other words, by not subjecting the media production process to critical scrutiny, uses and gratifications tacitly affirms the existing capitalistic order. The point is that in order to understand mass media in society in all its richness the object of our research must be to examine all facets of the mass media within society. Thus, whether one starts from the premise of functionalism or

its variant, uses and gratifications, it is clear that these approaches are inherently conservative since they seek to explain the media or how people use them in terms of a system equilibrating model. Because of this, such researchers cannot be other than apologists for the dominant ideology.

Uses and gratifications preoccupation with the audience is mirrored by early effects researches concern with the media as being all powerful. Early effects research considered the audience as passive recipients of media content. But as with uses and gratifications research, effects research never considered the content of the mass media as reflecting the specific ideology of the bourgeoisie.

The shifting of emphasis represented by effects researches concern with media content and uses and gratifications concern with the audience is fairly typical of the historical development of mass communication research in this country. The topics of the various approaches to mass communication research have tended to switch foci between the producers and recipients of mass communication. What must be done is to examine mass communication in all of its facets. To ignore the producers or the audience or the society in which the mass media operate is to arbitrarily segment the study of mass communication and thus achieve only an incomplete picture of the mass media. Finally, this segmentation neglects the historicity of mass media development in society and thereby accentuates the capitalistic stage of society as one which always was, always will be and will always remain the same.

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